Terrorist Trends and Ties

By Douglas S. Blaufarb

ROBERT H. KUPPERMAN and DARRELL M. TRENT. *Terrorism: Threat, Reality, Response.* Stanford, CA, Hoover Institution, 1979.

CLAIRE STERLING. *The Terror Network.* New York, NY, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Reader's Digest Press, 1981.

YONAH ALEXANDER, DAVID CARLTON, and PAUL WILKINSON, Eds. *Terrorism: Theory and Practice.* Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1979.

HERBERT ROMERSTEIN. *Soviet Support for International Terrorism.* Washington, DC, The Foundation for Democratic Education, 1981.

THE TROUBLE with trying to think about modern political terrorism to some purpose is that it is so widespread and so varied in form that there are few general statements that apply to all important elements except that they all use violence. A large and growing literature by Western journalists and scholars has grappled with the problem.[1]

The reason for the interest is not far to seek. Any novel social phenomenon will, of course, engage the interest of the community whose business it is to study such matters. This certainly happened in the 1950's and 1960's, for example, when guerrilla warfare loomed as an important new factor in the less developed world. In addition, political terrorism is by no means limited to remote and relatively primitive areas. For the Western world, the fascination of terrorism lies in its appearance right here, in the midst of our unexciting, suburbanized, homogenized modernity, shouting out to us between commercials for false-teeth adhesives and stomach-soothers. It has the same shock value as if a war party of Indian braves were suddenly to descend on Pennsylvania Avenue taking the scalps of commuters and file clerks on their lunch hour. Moreover, it turns out that the war party is not composed of real Indians but recognizable young compatriots from the privileged minority—Mark Rudds, Bernadine Dohrns, and Katherine Boudins. No wonder we seek to determine what it all means.

The focus here is on urban terrorism, as distinguished from the organized violence for pressure and propaganda purposes that accompanies rural insurgencies of the type conducted and advocated by such as Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara. Urban terrorism is not a new phenomenon; it frightened our ancestors in Europe and America in the last half of the 19th century. However, as an instrument of left-wing revolutionaries, it was eclipsed and somewhat discredited from the time of the Russian Revolution until quite recently. Its reemergence as a tool of the militant Left seems to have been a matter of virtually spontaneous combustion, although some exemplary role was certainly played by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) Provos, the extremist wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Trotskyites in Argentina, none of whom were in a position to follow the precepts of rural guerrilla warfare. It was quickly taken up in Latin America after the resounding failure of Castroite insurgency in Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and elsewhere. After Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil became the testing grounds. While advocates of urban terrorism presented it as guerrilla warfare conducted in the cities,[2] the urban environment is really not suitable for guerrilla operations, and the phenomenon remained terrorism plain

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[1] A reasonably thorough run-down on English-language materials is August R. Norton and Martin H. Greenberg, Eds., *International Terrorism: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide,* Boulder, CO, Westview, 1980. This guide categorizes some 1,000-plus titles topically and geographically, and includes a novel section on terrorism in fiction. It is, however, limited by its omission of works in German, Italian, or French, not to mention less accessible languages. A student seeking the titles of works by the early anarchist Johan Most would not find them here. They are written in German. Similarly with the untranslated work of Franz Fanon and Regis Debray, available only in French.

[2] See the most influential tract on the subject, Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla,* reproduced as an appendix to Robert Moss, *Urban Guerrilla Warfare,* London, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971.

and simple. It nevertheless spread rapidly to most parts of the world (except the Communist areas), a fact brought home graphically by television and the other media.

THERE ARE various categories of urban terrorist movements, the principal division being between nationalist and separatist movements (IRA, PLO, Basque, Quebecois, Puerto Rican, and so on), on the one hand, and militant left-wing movements in democratic or near-democratic states, on the other. What "success" terrorism would appear to have had—and certain successes doubtless underlie the persistence of the phenomenon—seems to have come in the first category. A host of modern states have emerged in part as a result of urban terrorist activity. The technique goes back at least as far as the struggle of various nations for independence from the Turks and of the Irish from England. Attached to this category as a subspecies are those desperate little separatist movements whose message is: "Do not forget us," or "Revenge is ours." Among them are Croat, Armenian, and South Moluccan groups.

Of the urban terrorists in the democratic world, we can distinguish movements in the still not fully developed nations (e.g., Brazil, Argentina, Turkey, and Mexico) and those in the fully industrialized democratic nations of the West, including Japan. It is in the former that urban terrorism has had its greatest, if most perverse, political impact. In Argentina, Uruguay, and Turkey, relatively democratic regimes have been overthrown by military coups reacting against terrorism, and the terrorists themselves have been largely destroyed. That is virtually the only political result of any of the terrorist movements in noncolonial settings since modern political terrorism emerged as a noteworthy phenomenon. However, such destruction of democratic systems by right-wing counterterror, it should be noted, has been and remains a first objective of these allegedly left-wing movements: the hope is that the people at large will become sufficiently aroused by right-wing suppression to support the militants in a subsequent serious bid for power.[3]

Perhaps the most bewildering to the public and experts alike have been the urban terrorists in industrialized democracies. What motivates these scions of privilege—the Baader-Meinhof Gang of West Germany, the Angry Brigade of Britain, the Red Brigades of Italy, the Weathermen of the United States, and numerous other grouplets, many comprising a mere handful—who burst upon our awareness mouthing irrational cries and brandishing machine guns? In their study of terrorism, Robert Kupperman and Darrell Trent suggest that terrorists of this stripe "seem to be propelled by a profound self-hatred, a nausea concerning their own historical-material identities that leads them to seek the negation of the very culture that nurtured them." More and more, they have tended toward violence for its own sake, as a more exciting form of self-expression.[4] The terrorists bespeak a desperation most people do not feel. The unreality of their pretensions and of their analysis of the scene about them, as well as the radical disconnection between their alleged goals and the means they advocate for reaching these goals, cause them to be viewed by their compatriots as dangerously disturbed minds rather than as the vanguard of the future.

In none of the democratic countries has the incoherent rhetoric or violent episodes evoked any detectable political response. This lack of response, problems of morale (disciplined terrorist activity can be very dull work performed over long periods of time), and improved police work seemed by the end of the 1970's to be leading to the disappearance of this social pathology from the democratic, industrialized world.

Yet in 1980 and 1981, new episodes perpetrated by a new generation of militant desperadoes broke upon us. The attempts on the lives of Pope John Paul II and Generals Frederick J. Kroesen and James Dozier, the Brinks robbery, and many other less spectacular events remind us that urban terrorism has not fully spent its power. By and large, the new generation of "decivilized" bomb-throwers appear less coherent, less rational, less well organized—mere epigones of their predecessors—and are inclined to flirt with the drug culture while plotting to bring down society. One should note, however, the continued existence of another, small category of "career professionals" of preeminent skills, available on demand so long as the goal is vaguely "revolutionary" and the resources generous. These include the famous "Carlos," a Venezuelan trained in Russia and employed by the PLO, and—probably—the Turk Mehmet Ali Agca, who carried out the attempt on the Pope.

One should also recognize the existence of terrorism of the right wing. Some observers believe that this kind is likely to increase especially in European countries with a fascist

[3] A point made by Claire Sterling in *The Terror Network* (p. 22). Walter Laqueur makes a similar point, stating that the strategy dates from 19th-century terrorist theory. See his *Terrorism*, Boston, MA, and Toronto, Little Brown and Co., 1979, p. 186. Laqueur's study was reviewed in Abraham Ascher, "Lessons of Russian Terrorism," *Problems of Communism* (Washington, DC), November-December 1980, pp. 70–74.

[4] Walter Laqueur describes the terrorists as suffering from "the crisis of identity, suburban boredom, the desire for excitement and action, a certain romantic streak, in short terrorism as a cure for personality problems." Op. cit., pp. 209–10.

past. Recent events such as the bombing of the railway station in Bologna and the brief takeover of the Spanish parliament by a group of younger army officers add credibility to this prediction.

At any rate, the landscape is generally familiar, although there are a few strange new wrinkles. For example, Claire Sterling mentions in *The Terrorist Network* that right-wing terrorists have been welcomed at some of the Middle Eastern training camps set up by the Communists and have trained there side by side with militant leftists. Neo-fascists in Italy have also accepted help from Libya, which at the same time aids and nurtures leftist terrorists. This trend suggests that less may separate the two extremes of the political spectrum than either would be prepared to admit.

In European history, threats and acts of violence from the Left have always brought forth similar threats and acts from the Right, which, because of support from the military, can usually prevail. The rise of fascism between the wars reflects this dynamic. It certainly cannot be ruled out that terrorism of the Left will bring on a resurgence of fascism with a new name. One might envision such a scenario in countries—notably Spain, Portugal, and especially Italy—which have sizable Communist movements allied to militant trade unions with a tradition of violence and which have already in modern times experienced long periods under dictatorial regimes. So far, however, only in Italy has modern urban terrorism attracted sufficient numbers of recruits, many of a high caliber in terms of education and dedication, to make such a scenario even remotely possible. And the Italian nation, despite a crushing load of serious social problems, still clings to democratic norms and fights with increasing effectiveness against the threat.

FOR ALL the difference in approach and fortunes of the terrorists, there are certain common requirements of terrorism, no matter where or by whom it is applied. Most obvious is the need for compartmentalized, cellular organization, clandestine communication, and careful attention to security.

However, the authors of the books under review point to other similarities which are of greater interest. One is the "propaganda of the deed," an old idea inherited from the 19th century but multiplied manyfold in importance by the instantaneous and dramatic effect of modern media, notably television. Instant notoriety and recognition create the illusion of success in restless and aggressive minds and stimulate their owners to further feats; they also attract emulation and thereby create a snowball effect. Something like this took place after 1968 when a phase of spectacular airplane hijackings, kidnapings, and murders was launched by the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine, followed quickly by similar acts by other groups in the Middle East and Western Europe.

At the same time, the piling up of episode upon episode produces a jaded reaction and no lasting effect. Where does the terrorist turn when he has deployed his bag of tricks more than once, is still far from gaining his ostensible aims, and feels himself slipping back into obscurity and helplessness? He can, of course, change targets, techniques, and locales, but that merely postpones the reckoning. The temptation exists to try for ever more spectacular episodes, with the threat (noted by many commentators in the books under review) that the terrorists might seek to wreak mass destruction through the use of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. In *Terrorism: Threat, Reality, Response,* Kupperman and Trent set the problem thus:

Violent acts against the government and society are possible today and may not be totally improbable in coming years. The LaGuardia bombing and the specter of "Philadelphia fever" convey the message; the clock is running, the irrational may occur.

The authors take the threat seriously enough to provide detailed analyses of vulnerabilities and of the state of preparedness in the US to deal with major catastrophes.

In their useful review of recent work on terrorism, Yonah Alexander, David Carlton, and Paul Wilkinson also ponder the threat of mass destruction. David Carlton, writing on "The Future of Sub-state Violence," points out that until now, political terrorists have generally been "conservative" in their modalities of violence, relying mainly on bombs and automatic firearms, but he predicts that terrorists will become progressively more violent and destructive, and raises the possibility that in time the threat of mass destruction will become more serious. However, trends toward less political rationality—which would underlie any threat to destroy the very masses in whose interests the threat is ostensibly made—and toward feebler organization among the terrorists would tend to reduce their ability to mobilize the technical skills required to make a threat of mass destruction possible and to keep arrangements secret. The possibility of such threats cannot, of course, be ignored. It is prudent to improve our defenses and our ability to cope with large-scale disaster, but the menace of mass destruction should not preoccupy us to the exclusion of other threats, which evidence a more rational calculation of costs and benefits to the terrorists.

EVEN MORE important as a common factor than playing to the media and the resulting pressure for more sensational exploits is the interlocking and cooperative nature of many of the terrorist enterprises and, beyond that, their dependence not only on each other but also on certain political movements or governments for the means to carry out their programs. Most obvious among the latter are Cuba and the militant enemies of Israel in the Arab world, notably the PLO, Libya, Algeria, and South Yemen. But, if we probe further, we find that these, in turn, depend upon the training and guidance of such states as East Germany, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, and finally, of course, the Soviet Union.

This is the simplified essence of the somewhat breathless but still highly factual account laid out by Claire Sterling in *The Terror Network.* Her book attracted much attention when it appeared more than a year ago at the time of the installation of a new administration in Washington and the charges by the new Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, and others that the Soviets were supporting and encouraging terrorism. Although Sterling has been criticized for going beyond the evidence and for such political lapses as "undermining détente," her volume is in fact a carefully crafted amassing of detail culled largely from already public sources. Unlike most journalists' accounts, hers is in large part footnoted and sourced. The involvement of the Soviet Union through many surrogates is not very much of a secret—all the other books under consideration here make the same charge. What Sterling does is attempt to build a complete picture, to show in the most specific terms how the Soviet involvement works.

In making the case about Soviet involvement, Sterling explicitly denies that the evidence shows the Kremlin to be masterminding a worldwide terrorist conspiracy. What Moscow has done—and continues to do—is to facilitate, improve, strengthen, and encourage left-wing terrorist activities wherever they spring up against non-Communist governments. It pursues this course through education and training on a large scale (in South Yemen, North Korea, the USSR, and elsewhere) and guidance of the secret services of friendly governments in similar training efforts, through the channeling of subsidies through intermediaries, and through the provision of weapons and other support services of every kind—usually, again, via intermediaries. On the other hand, it does not in most cases plan or direct the activities of the groups it supports. It merely makes them possible.

A similar point is made more briefly by Herbert Romerstein in his pamphlet *Soviet Support for International Terrorism.* Romerstein cites some of the same evidence and some additional material to demonstrate Soviet involvement in supporting terrorism. He does not, however, go into the more difficult question of whether or not Moscow tries to direct terrorist activities.

The cost-effectiveness of this involvement by the Soviets and their cohorts is sobering. According to a CIA estimate cited by Sterling, the USSR puts the equivalent of about US$200 million a year into its support activities for so-called "wars of national liberation." This investment ensures a highly professionalized apparatus and a continuing flow of trained recruits to take the place of those who fall by the wayside. It helps embed Soviet propaganda and ideology in the minds of the terrorist cadres, with the result, carefully documented by Sterling, that the IRA, the Basques, Palestinians, and Marxist anti-Khomeini Iranians all spout the same crude "anti-imperialist" catechism. The resulting terrorism becomes a serious problem for governments whom the Soviets regard as ideological enemies, embarrassing them and exposing them as weak and vacillating, and causing serious internal strains. All of this comes at less cost than one heavy cruiser or a few modern bombers.

The beauty of the situation from the Soviet standpoint is that there have so far been no costs of a nonmonetary nature. As Sterling points out, the target governments have bent over backward to avoid confronting Moscow about its behavior and have done their best to keep what they know from coming to public attention. Indeed, there is little these governments can do directly except to put relations with the Soviet Union in the deep freeze and explain why, frequently and emphatically. Such a policy, it appears, would be unpalatable to large elements of their publics, at least in Western Europe, and would reverse policies of rapprochement with the East in which the governments, ironically, have sizable political investments.

In the past, some observers have described Soviet policy regarding terrorism of the "anarchic" type we are discussing as being firmly "negative."[5] On the other hand, Walter Laqueur has traced what he sees as a consistent thread of ambiguity in the Bolshevik stance, and opines that the Soviet Union finds itself in a dilemma vis-à-vis terrorism—between the goal of international respectability and the desire not to leave the field to its ideological rivals on the left.[6] However, there is little sign of either negative views or ambiguity in the tale that Sterling

[5] See, for example, Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon,* Glencoe, IL, The Free Press, 1960, p. 237.

[6] Laqueur, op. cit., pp. 197–201.

tells, and one fears that Laqueur has overlooked the effectiveness of the Soviet tactic of working largely through intermediaries.

WHAT, on balance, is the threat of urban terrorism? If we look at a map of the world, it is not the urban terrorism in Israel, Ulster, Spain, or Italy, but the combination of terrorism with rural insurgency in El Salvador, Cambodia, Namibia, or Guatemala that seems to pose the greatest danger.

The latter, attacking backward regimes with limited capabilities (if unaided) to defend themselves, is a pressing problem for consideration by the US and other industrialized democracies. But that is a story for another time. As for urban terrorism, it is an extremely nasty and costly problem. But it is hardly a threat to the societies in which it has appeared, except as a factor which might in some circumstances trigger a successful right-wing response.